

**A Bakhtinian Reading of a Mexican Origin Pre-Service Teacher's Testimonial on
Schooling**

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In this study, I use a future teacher's final paper in a recent undergraduate education course as my data source to better understand the Latina schooling experience along the United States-Mexico border. I give the language in this future teacher's paper the attention and techniques used in literary study, such as giving particular attention when figures of speech are used. One work that advocates the use of these techniques and a major reference in this study is Joseph Tobin's *Good Guys Don't Wear Hats: Children's Talk About the Media* (2000). Mikhail Bakhtin's work was useful in analysis presented in *Good Guys Don't Wear Hats*. Although Bakhtin's work (and V.N. Vološinov's, who is said to be Bakhtin) developed from literary analysis of the novel, his insight on techniques for uncovering meaning in text were useful and principal in my analysis.

The approach of my study is not to analyze what the student, Marta (pseudonym), says related to the assignment's central question (What was the impact of schooling on your culture?), but what she reveals about the Latina experience in school. As Bakhtin would note, Marta herself is not the focus of the investigation, as that would confound the author-creator, "a constituent in a work", with the author-person, "a constituent in the ethical, social event of life" (1990, p. 10). Bakhtin, however, would also note that Marta cannot be ignored nor can social factors for that would be a failure to understand that Marta created the person presented in the story.

According to Vološinov: "Sociological analysis can take its starting point only, of course, from the purely verbal, linguistic makeup of a work, but it must not and cannot confine itself within those limits" (1976, p. 109). Data from outside the story, including social descriptions, will be used to highlight Marta's experience. Marta's story will, in turn, give insight into social statistics that are commonly collected. Readers may want to refer to the appendix for a selection from Marta's final paper. Paragraph numbers were added to assist in referencing the selection.

Marta and the Mexican-American, the Female, and the 21 Year Old

The quest begins by giving Marta's story full valuation as a document for understanding the Latina school experience. Marta begins her paper with, "My name is Marta and I am a Mexican-American female. I am now twenty years old and growing up was quite an experience for me." The statements sound very definitive and straightforward, like she is about to give testimonio or is setting up to tell a story, and a second look shows there may be more to it than is first apparent. Using techniques used in literary study may help in sharing in the meaning of the work. For instance, one technique is to look for repetition in the text, and Marta uses "I am" twice, the first time to signify she is a Mexican-American female. Here, giving Marta's text the attention and techniques used in literary study supports the critical race theorist notion of the power of ethnic labels in determining who we are to others.

George Lipsitz argues that labeling groups as non-White is used to stigmatize and exploit members of minority groups while at the same time preserving the value of Whiteness (1998). Convincing segments of the population that they are in power increases interest from those segments in maintaining existing power relations. Socially constructed concepts such as race and the idea of a dominant culture aid in maintaining the status quo. The idea of a white dominating majority in the U.S. whose members are more like each other than they are like Asian, Black, and Hispanic persons is used to garner consent for existing power structures. Lipsitz argues "that white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides...resources, power, and opportunity. This whiteness is...a scientific and cultural fiction that...has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology...created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity" (p. vii).

Marta's early and clear declaration of an ethnic label connotes an experience for Mexican origin persons that precludes self-description without the ascription of a minority label. Marta's story begins by making the obvious clear: Mexican origin persons are not considered the cultural norm, and therefore require a qualifier.

George Herbert Mead theorizes how attitudes get internalized:

We are more or less unconsciously seeing ourselves as others see us. We are unconsciously addressing ourselves as others address us...[W]e pick up the dialects about us. We are calling out in the other person something we are calling out in ourselves, so that unconsciously we take over those attitudes (1962, pp. 68-69).

Mead develops the concept of a "generalized other" as the taking of the attitudes of others towards oneself and crystallizing them into a single attitude or standpoint (1962). The claim that we form an image based on how others image us is supported by Bakhtin's notion that it is "far from easy" to "visualize one's own outward image in imagination, to 'feel' oneself from outside, to translate oneself from the language of inner self-sensation into that of outward expressedness in being" (1976, p. 29).

While Mead's notion appears neutral, forming a generalized other based on how others see us can be devaluating if the attitudes about us are also devaluating or if those around us do not value what we value. An ethnographic study that gives insight into the attitudes high school students have about Mexican origin persons is Angela Valenzuela's *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* which shows a process whereby the abilities, skills, and culture that students bring to school are given value relative to how closely they are perceived to match those of the (theoretical) dominant U.S. culture (1999). For example, school personnel and students (95% Hispanic) at the school that was studied, see the Spanish language as inferior to English. Perceived inferiorities are communicated through ridicule, by ignoring the

additive properties of non-dominant traits, and by other means by which qualities are demonstrated to be undesirable.

Marta's story gives insight into attitudes about Mexican origin persons and how the attitudes relate to schooling. Marta tells us she chose to hang out with other Mexican origin persons who did not speak Spanish because she did not "want to get ridiculed at school" (paragraph 11). Marta writes that the parents of some of these students were ashamed to teach their children Spanish, implying that some parents spoke the language but suppressed its use. By describing the outcome of schooling as a line on a transcript, Marta shows how parents factor into the devaluation process by using minority enrollment as a proxy for a school's ability to give children valuable credentials and opportunities:

Most of the white kids that went to Jr. High with us were transferred by their parents to other schools in another district, because it looked better on their transcripts. Our high school was supposedly a "ghetto" high school (paragraph 10).

The use of quotations around the word ghetto highlights the need to take a closer looker.

In using "ghetto," Marta is implying that, like individuals, high schools get ascribed labels. Furthermore, dialogic writing is used to give a sense of parent and community dialogue that implicates Marta's school as inferior. Use of quotation marks coupled with the word "supposedly" gives a sense that the term is being misapplied. Dialogism is furthermore present because youth commonly refer to experiences perceived to be inferior as "ghetto." For instance, behavior or a quality that does not meet expectations is admonished with, "That is so ghetto." Marta uses the word "ghetto" as a metonym or a figure of speech that uses the name of one thing for that of another thing that it is associated with. Ghetto is associated with urban plight and minorities, especially Black minorities, but also ethnic minorities. Being designated a ghetto school implies high minority concentrations and an inferior status.

Using the powerful simile “smart like the white kids,” Marta implies that students get the sense that teachers also require the dropping of behavior associated with Mexican origin persons if the students wishes success in the classroom: “I always thought I had to be smart like the white kids to please the teacher” (paragraph 9). Also in using a simile to describe smartness, Marta reveals an understanding of different types of smartness. In essence, Marta describes a situation consistent with *Subtractive Schooling* where, to deflect attacks and make gains in the classroom, Mexican origin students avoided Spanish and other distinguishing behavior because “they didn’t want to seem *too* Mexican” (paragraph 11). She also describes a situation consistent with the segregation literature that shows that race is a very powerful force in guiding family school choices. (See for example Bankston and Caldas (1996); Clotfelter (2000); Saporito and Lareau (1999).) Considering Marta’s perceptions on the link between ethnicity and schooling, beginning the paper by delineating she is Mexican-American is no longer as startling.

Paired along with the ethnic label, Marta lists her gender. Marta could have said, “My Name is Marta and I am Mexican-American.” Perhaps she was revealing her gender, despite its obviousness given her name, to reveal a sense that gender is, like ethnicity, of considerable consequence to her experience. This also is not surprising since much of her story deals with relationships, with her mother, her father, her sisters, her teachers, her boyfriend, and gender is paramount in relationships.

Thus, Marta begins by describing herself by giving her name, her ethnicity, and her gender before laying out what she hopes to do: describe her experience growing up in her culture which she implies was extraordinary (by using the word “quite”) and singular (by finishing with “for me”). She adds an age descriptor in the second line when she declares she is *now* 21 years of age. Adding her age and qualifying it with “now” gives the sense that she is somehow

different than before, and different than she will be. Perhaps, besides framing where she is on the continuum of life, she also gives her age and qualifies it with “now” as evidence of being grown up and of being wise to forces that subtracted from her in her recent adolescence.

Interesting here also is that the three variables she uses to describe herself are the three most common variables used in gauging the United States population: gender, age, and ethnicity. Data is usually available disaggregated by these three variables. Marta’s account, however, is not depersonalized, as is the case with most descriptions of the school experience, since the very first descriptor she uses is her name, preceding the other descriptors, and reminding that the whole of herself is more important than any individual variable or grouping of variables. In other words, she is a composite whole and not a collection of categories, as supported by her conclusion:

I am just me, and all the things that I have experienced in my life. There is no one who has been through exactly what I have been through, and I’m glad, because these memories are my own to tell.

Complex as it seems already, this analysis of Marta’s opening remarks only begins to unravel the strong meaning encoded within them, and demonstrates that techniques can be borrowed from literary studies to gain a fuller understanding of the Latino school experience.

Marta and Other Descriptors

Marta’s story gives insight into other variables that are usually the focus of education researchers. For instance, in listing her place of birth and describing her parents’ origins (paragraph 2), Marta continues to list demographic variables that are commonly collected. She illustrates that her family had U.S. and foreign-born members and that commingling occurred despite her parents’ places of origin.

The U.S. has a long history of collecting information on its immigrant and foreign-born populations including through the decennial Census. Reynaldo Macías notes that early Census “questions on English language ability [that is, beginning with the 1890 Census] mainly sought to identify [and describe] the foreign born and their progeny” (2000, p. 14).

Along with place-of-birth information, Marta provides other commonly collected social descriptors such as the incidence of teenage pregnancy. Marta indicates a blind, mistaken, or perhaps deluded early coupling of her parents (“Both were young and stupidly in love at the time”) that lead to a high school pregnancy followed by two more births. In using the word “both,” she indicates her feelings of dual responsibility for the coupling. Marta demonstrates the enduring importance of pregnancy to the Latina schooling experience when she shows that pregnancy was also a noticeable factor in effecting dropouts at her school (paragraph 10). Joining her in high school were those persons who were not transferred to more desirable schools and those “who didn’t drop out of middle school because they got pregnant or other reasons.”

Marta also lists characteristics that are usually collected, but her story demonstrates that the outcomes related to those characteristics are usually not available. For example, to conclude her second paragraph, Marta acknowledges other powerful influences by offering her position as a middle child as another determinant of her experience. Ages of household members are available in Census collections, and therefore, statistics based on birth order are available; however, the outcomes that birth order purportedly influences, Marta’s “issues to deal with,” are not collected. In fact, Marta never delineates these issues because she is aware they are commonly understood, as is demonstrated by her use of the cliché, “they always say.”

In paragraph 3, Marta enters a realm that educational researchers seem to usually mistakenly avoid: feelings. Marta gives a wealth of information on her feelings towards her

father, and those feelings are crucial to her experiences in school and in her relationships with others. By stating, “At the age of five or six we left my dad,” she seems to indicate whom she felt took the initiative to separate. This statement also does more to show the allegiances that formed (since the pronoun “we” was used to designate her mother, her sisters, and herself even though the age descriptor applied only to herself) and to indicate whom she felt was to blame (her father, since they left him). Also, by stating that she “never really” remembered her father or the times they had “during that time in my life, anyway,” Marta hints that thoughts of her father often entered her mind as she grew up, although the specifics of their early relationship may be blurry. Looking closely at Marta words allows for this apparent contradiction between what is said and what is meant. Vološinov gives insight into how the contradiction is reconciled, if his concept of community is applied to Marta and her intended reader, the course grader:

If a value judgment is in actual fact conditioned by the being of a given community, it becomes a matter of dogmatic belief, something taken for granted and not subject to discussion. On the contrary, whenever some basic value judgment is verbalized and justified, we may be certain that it has already become dubious, has separated from its referent, has ceased to organize life, and, consequently, has lost its connection with the existential conditions of the given group. (1976, p. 101)

That is, in mentioning she did not think of her father often shows that she perhaps did.

Marta also provides socioeconomic descriptors in paragraph 3. She remembers poverty growing up and implies an inadequate fathering job by her father by describing their house as a small cement house without doors, even in the bathroom where provisions for gender should be made. So, all Marta “really” remembers of her dad is that “he used to drink, sleep and watch M*A*S*H.”

Her father’s drinking and sleeping, and later, abusive behavior (paragraph 6), implies a problem with alcohol. Like with other deficiency statistics on the Latino population, such as drop out rates (versus graduation rates), information on the prevalence of alcohol is readily available

disaggregated by race and Hispanic origin. By stating, “I hate that show still to this very day” Marta is exclaiming she hates her father’s use of alcohol and the part it played in her life with him, and she continues to hate these aspects “to this very day.”

Marta’s descriptors help frame her home life as well as school life in much the same way educational educators attempt to describe the home and school life of students, thus implying support for their efforts. Race/ ethnicity and gender are usually considered. Age is sometimes considered. For the Latino population especially, foreign-born status is sometimes considered as well as language spoken at home, the prevalence of poverty, teenage pregnancy, and alcohol use. Marta’s story addresses all of these. She also brings insight into other factors that add to the description of the Latina experience: relationships, feelings, and attitudes.

Marta and Relationships

“We” as a grouping of the three sisters, and not as mother and daughters or as mother, father, and daughters, begins in paragraph 4 with the separation of Marta’s family, hinting at the effects of parent separation on family dynamics. Marta writes, “Since then, we were mostly encouraged not to have anything to do with him, plus it wasn’t like he ever made an effort to spend time with us after that.” By using “mostly” to describe encouragement to not interact with their father, Marta shows that she is speaking generally and leaves room for times of doubt or confusion about the desired role for their father in their lives. Marta adds that her father did not make efforts to spend time with them after the separation. Using “plus” to link the efforts on both sides demonstrates that Marta sees mutual rejection.

To emphasize her uncertainty on how she feels about men, “especially Mexican men,” Marta states in paragraph 5 that she guesses growing up without a father had an effect on her

relationships with men: “I guess growing up without a dad, I am very uneasy about trusting men in my life, or they don’t really seem an important factor in my life.” The use of the word “really” adds to the evidence of uncertainty.

Marta adds in paragraph 6 that, “My mother taught her daughters to live without having to depend on anyone, especially a man. Especially Mexican men, She was hurt and she didn’t want us to get hurt the same way.” Use of the pronoun “her” in describing her mother’s lessons makes for an example of internal dialogue, or a situation where a person is speaking as someone else, since Marta, speaking for herself, may instead have said, “My mother taught *us* to live without having to depend on anyone, especially a man.” Two conclusions can be drawn from the use of this figure of speech: first, it is possible that Marta is at odds with, or at the least confused about, her mother’s notion of the inferiority of Mexican men and about the need for men in her life; second, it is possible that Marta is in strong agreement with her mother. Both possibilities are explored.

The first conclusion that Marta is at odds with her mother’s notions or, at least not totally convinced, is certainly viable given she now dates Roberto (pseudonym), a man of Mexican origin (paragraph 14). The conclusion is also viable given the discussion above on her uncertainty about needing men, “especially Mexican men” (paragraph 6). Marta’s words, and her non-Standard grammar, also provide support for this conclusion when Marta writes, possibly displaying a Freudian slip, that it was her mother, it was *She*, who was hurt by Mexican men: “Especially Mexican men, She was hurt and she didn’t want us to get hurt the same way.” She adds (in paragraph 14), “It was my mom who had experienced pain and blamed the rest of them, not me.”

Marta adds support for the first conclusion when she writes about her mother in paragraph 6 that “she would tell us the stories” about her father. By using “the” before “stories” gives a sense that there was a set of them. Also, the word “stories” gives a sense of the possibility of different versions.

Marta continues to give support for the conclusion that she is at odds with her mother’s notions of men when she writes in paragraph 7:

Growing up I had my admirers. It wasn’t until after high school that I noticed that I never dated a Mexican boy, they were all white. I guess unconsciously, I had let my mom’s prejudices against Mexican men become my own. I didn’t trust, or even was attracted to Mexican boys. My mom had painted a clear picture in my mind that if I did like them, they would just end up being drunks, cheating on me, or end up beating me.

The second conclusion, that Marta is in strong agreement with her mother on the notions of the inferiority of Mexican men and about the need for men in her life, is also viable given clues provided in Marta’s story. The second conclusion is very sensible given the descriptions in paragraphs 6 and 12 of the wretchedness in her mother’s, her sisters, and her life, caused by a man: “he used to drink all night and not show up until the ne[x]t day,” “he would be drunk and come home and beat her,” “he punched her right in the stomach” when she was expecting with child, “he never remembers any of our birthdays,” and he treats them like a burden.

Marta also *guesses* in paragraph 7 that her mother’s thoughts entered her thoughts unconsciously: “I guess unconsciously, I had let my mom’s prejudices against Mexican men become my own.” The hint of uncertainty with the phrase “I guess” might show that she is not quite sure if it was her mother’s stories or her own lived experience, including how she experienced the stories while growing up, such as dealing with the knowledge that a sibling was almost lost to the violence of a man, that led her to her conclusions.

Both conclusions are afforded plenty of support, so Marta is probably combining a rejection of the notion that men, and Mexican men, are not required in her life with a sense of reality about the damage men can make in her life. Marta's wavering on marriage supports this, and surfaces when she says, "when I want to get married" instead of the possible, "when I get married":

My dad and I still don't have a relationship, but that's okay. I always used to worry about it, like *when* I want to get married, I think, "Who will walk me down the aisle?". I don't know what's going to happen (paragraph 12, emphasis added).

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that student work is an additional source of information on the Latino schooling experience if the language in the work is afforded the attention and techniques used in literary study. Student work can bring insight into the typical indicators used to describe students as well as present descriptors that do not usually get considered, but that are necessary for a more complete description of the Latina schooling experience: relationships, feelings, and attitudes.

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Appendix A: The Student's Paper

(Selections from a final paper turned in by an undergraduate education major. Some identifiers have been altered to preserve anonymity.)

1 My name is Marta and I am a Mexican-American female. I am now twenty years old and growing up was quite an experience for me.

2 I was born in Phoenix, Arizona to my parents Alma and Juan. Both were young and stupidly in love at the time. My mom was born in Brownsville, Texas, my dad from San Luis Potosi, Mexico. My mom had my oldest sister, Leticia, when she was a senior in high school. It's just my two sisters, Leticia and Elena, and I. I was the middle child. They always say that the middle child always has some issues to deal with, and in my case, that was sometimes true.

3 At the age of five or six we left my dad. I never really remembered him or the times we had during that time in my life, anyway. At that time, I remember we were living in a small cement house, that didn't have any doors to any of the rooms, including the bathroom. So, all I really remember of my dad is that he used to drink, sleep and watch M*A*S*H. I hate that show still to this very day.

4 Since then, we were mostly encouraged not to have anything to do with him, plus it wasn't like he ever made an effort to spend time with us after that.

5 I guess growing up without a dad, I am very uneasy about trusting men in my life, or they don't really seem an important factor in my life.

6 My mother taught her daughters to live without having to depend on anyone, especially a man. Especially Mexican men, She was hurt and she didn't want us to get hurt the same way. When we got a little older, she would tell us the stories of how he used to drink all night and not show up until the next day, or how he would be drunk and come home and beat her. My mom

almost lost Leticia because he punched her right in the stomach one night. She said that by his actions he had shown us that he was not ready to be a father, not ready for a family. From that day, I hated him.

7 Growing up I had my admirers. It wasn't until after high school that I noticed that I never dated a Mexican boy, they were all white. I guess unconsciously, I had let my mom's prejudices against Mexican men become my own. I didn't trust, or even was attracted to Mexican boys. My mom had painted a clear picture in my mind that if I did like them, they would just end up being drunks, cheating on me, or end up beating me...

8 I've been going to public school all my life. Also, throughout, my entire school career, I have never had a Mexican teacher. They were all white, until I reached high school and my Spanish teacher was Mexican. It never really bothered me until later on in life, I just thought it was normal for only white people to teach us Mexican kids. Don't get me wrong, I really respected and loved each one of my teachers and they were excellent role models for me, it's just that I could relate to them very well. I just wanted to please them...

9 During school, I always thought I had to be smart like the white kids to please the teacher. I was always a pleaser. I had lost my Spanish that I knew when I entered school, so I thought school meant we had to be like the teacher and speak English all the time...

10 I returned to Arizona for high school and it was called West High. It was very small with 850 students and located near agricultural fields. The same crowd from elementary and Jr. High were there, well, actually only those who didn't drop out of middle school because they got pregnant or other reasons. Most of the white kids that went to Jr. High with us were transferred by their parents to other schools in another district, because it looked better on their transcripts. Our high school was supposedly a "ghetto" high school. We had some white kids, either they

were cowboys, drama geeks, or wanna-be Mexicans. We had black kids, and they were pretty much all into hip-hop stuff. Then we had the majority, Mexicans. But, it was weird because there were two types of Mexicans at our school. There were the Mexicans whose families had recently come to the United States, were in ESL, where the guys wore dickies and fake Tommy Hilfiger shirts, where the girls would wear really loud color clothes and who would party at the swap meet on 35th Avenue.

11 Then, there were the Mexicans whose families held positions in the city council, or were teachers at the school. Most of these kids didn't know how to speak Spanish either because their parents were ashamed of teaching them, or they had just lost it by hanging out with their white friends, or they didn't want to seem *too* Mexican. These were the kids I mostly hung out with. I hung out with them because I didn't want to get ridiculed at school, and my mom didn't teach us Spanish, anyways. It would be too hard for me to communicate with the other kids. It was just really confusing at school to figure out where you belonged...

12 My dad and I still don't have a relationship, but that's okay. I always used to worry about it, like when I want to get married, I think, "Who will walk me down the aisle?". I don't know what's going to happen. I saw him about a month ago, because he still lives in the same house in our same neighborhood with his third new wife, well, he was buying beer and he ran into at the grocery store. He wanted my sisters and I to give him a break on the child support, because he's in a financial bind right now. I said no. I wanted to cry because that was all he could say to me, never mind that it was Elena's birthday last week. He didn't even remember that either, he never remembers any of our birthdays.

13 My mom is remarried...to a white guy. But, he's cool and he makes her happy. They've been together for the last nine years. He is the father figure in my life right now, and he makes time for me whenever I need it. I'm really glad my mom met him...

14 I am very happy to tell you that I have found the love of my life. Funny enough, he is a Mexican man, and his name is Roberto. I love him with every inch of my soul, he is exactly like me and he knows how it was growing up in our little town, in our school, in our world. He is my soul mate and I am even happier that he is the same race as I. It was my mom who had experienced pain and blamed the rest of them, not me. I love that Luis is Hispanic just like me, we can relate to family traditions, barbeques, we love the same food, we love the same things, we love each other for what we bring into the relationship.

15 Now school, what can I say? I'm still doing it. I'm going to be an elementary school teacher, and I am excited. I have about another year to go and I'll be done.

16 I am just me, and all the things that I have experienced in my life. There is no one who has been through exactly what I have been through, and I'm glad, because these memories are my own to tell.